Improving Learning and Literacy in Abbott Classrooms

A Guidance Document 2006

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The New Jersey Department Of Education

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Introduction 

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In 2002, the New Jersey Department of Education directed Abbott school districts and schools to shift their attention from the implementation of highly specific and prescriptive court-ordered programs to teaching the New Jersey Core Curriculum Content Standards (CCCS), with a strong emphasis on early literacy. As a part of that process, we asked Abbott educators to analyze a lot of evidence about student work and achievement as an essential step in adjusting instruction. It's only fair that the department follow its own advice when it sets policies and practices for the rest of you. So, what have we learned from the evidence?

Abbott students are not taught what they are expected to learn.

The lessons for standards-based instruction

First lesson: if Abbott students are not taught what they are expected to learn as defined by the CCCS, they will almost certainly fail the state tests. We know that most Abbott districts are just catching up with the essential job of creating and maintaining a curriculum closely aligned to the CCCS, that lays out clear instructional goals for students and teachers, strategies to cope with struggling students, instructional materials that support the CCCS, and the requisite professional development for teachers. The adoption of the core standards and key Abbott decisions came along at about the same time. While other districts focused on introducing world languages in the elementary grades, Abbott districts focused on Whole School Reform (WSR) selection and school budgeting.

The absence of an updated and fully aligned curriculum is most noticeable in three areas:

- Even though writing counts for about 50 percent of the NJ Assessments of Skills and Knowledge (NJASK), many districts have only recently introduced systematic instruction in "process writing;"
- A student who is not grounded in the core curricular mathematics concepts and skills in grades 5 through 8, which require new instructional materials and intensive teacher training, is not likely to pass Grade Eight Proficiency Assessment (GEPA) math; and,
- Students who do not pursue a college preparatory course of study--and most Abbott students have not—are not likely to pass the High School Proficiency Assessment (HSPA).

Higher-performing Abbott districts continuously adjust their curricula by working backwards from the HSPA, GEPA or ASK tests to capture the cumulative knowledge and skills that students should absorb in earlier grades.

Second lesson: we know how to teach younger students to develop strong reading and writing skills, but after 4th grade it is much more difficult to make a weak reader into a strong one. In 2005, 73.9 percent of unclassified and non-English language learners in Abbott districts were proficient on the NJASK4

language arts test, up from 33.8 percent in 1999. And in 2004, districts that began more systematic instruction in writing that year, their proficiency rates increased by around 20 percentage points. Although no Abbott district equaled or exceeded the 2005 New Jersey proficiency level for total students of 83.3 percent (the closest reached 80.0 percent), two Abbott districts met or exceeded the New Jersey proficiency level for general education students of 89.2 percent. The benchmark of 87.7 percent proficiency for all students set by non-Abbott districts in 2005 is within our grasp.

Third lesson: GEPA math is a very tough test. Students in districts that stick to memorization, drills and push "math lite" courses are unlikely to pass GEPA, regardless of how much "test prep" they're given. New Jersey's math standards get increasingly rigorous and difficult for both students and teachers after 4th grade. While over two-thirds (67.1 percent) of all Abbott students passed the 2005 4th grade math section (versus 86.5 percent in non-Abbott districts), just over a third (34.0 percent) passed GEPA math (versus 69.4 percent in non-Abbott districts) and under half (47.7 percent) passed HSPA math (versus 80.4 percent in non-Abbott districts). While there was one Abbott district that exceeded the non-Abbott proficiency on the 2005 GEPA math section for all students - proof that this is a problem we can solve - there are five districts where less than one-quarter of all eighth graders were proficient or advanced proficient.

Fourth lesson: almost half of Abbott students are three times more likely to come from families whose first language is other than English (in Abbott districts the proportion of students with a non-English home language is 39.1 percent. The average in non-Abbott districts is just 13.1 percent. Many districts and schools were unprepared for the rapid growth of English language learners (ELL) and are still trying to figure out how to teach them to read and write English well. In districts where ELL and former ELL students do better on state tests, there was more exact screening of students' native and English language abilities who benefited from a broader range of instruction, including sheltered English and native language instruction.

Fifth lesson: Abbott's large comprehensive high schools don't work. A growing and suspiciously large percentage (36.7 in 2004) of Abbott high schools have a majority of their students graduating via Special Review Assessment (SRA)* while among non-Abbott high schools the percentage is only 1.3 percent. In 2004, 43.9 percent of Abbott high schools had fewer than one-third of juniors who passed the HSPA math test, and only four Abbott high schools exceeded the New Jersey average – all of them selective. When so many rising 9th graders start high school without adequate preparation, such results are not surprising.

Most of what Abbott schools and districts will be asked to do in the upcoming school year draw on these lessons. The relentless focus remains on student achievement, with special attention to literacy and math. There is evidence beyond student test results on which we base our requests and requirements.

Other lessons of Abbott

The Abbott court decisions provide the resources and the opportunity to close the achievement gap between affluent and poor districts. We are making progress, but some lessons need particular emphasis.

*This percentage is conservative given the fact that four Abbott districts (Asbury Park, Irvington, Long Branch, and Passaic) did not report their SRA graduation rates in 2004.

First, to close the achievement gap, Abbott districts and schools need to focus on teaching and learning and on the evidence of what works and what needs to be changed. Too often, the education process is interrupted by state, federal, and judicial requirements. Focus on achievement requires simplicity of goals and a limit to irrelevant paperwork.

Second, if what the Abbott division requires does not influence and improve the dynamic between teachers and students, then we're wasting everyone's time and money. As we track those schools and districts that are making progress and achieving results well beyond what would be predicted, we find that there's a focus on teaching the most powerful and frequently-tested core standards.

Third, what counts is not funding, staff, materials, and computers, but how the funds, staff, materials, and computers are used. Abbott districts have the resources to get the job done, and that job is to greatly improve the academic performance of their students. There is ample evidence that the districts that have the lowest student-teacher ratios, the most certified teachers outside the classroom, the highest per-pupil spending, and the most commercial educational programs are those that are performing less well than their peer districts.

NCLB and Abbott

This guidance does not ignore the enormous impact of *NCLB* on public education. To the maximum extent possible, we have tried to integrate the schedule, reports, and work required by *NCLB* with Abbott requirements. The Collaborative Assessment and Planning for Achievement (CAPA) process, as implemented in 2004-05, is an example of this objective. *NCLB* and Abbott share the same goals: to ensure that every student masters the core standards and graduates from high school equipped to attend a four-year university. *NCLB's* implementation, however, is another matter, with its mechanical judgments of schools and districts and its unfair testing mandates for ELL's and some students with disabilities.

In 2005-06, more Abbott schools will be in the 4th year of "in need of improvement," meaning that they must receive an external site visit and must submit a school improvement plan.

Planning and reporting

The Three-year Operational Plan for each Abbott district and school will expire at the end of the 2005-2006 school year. It will be replaced by the Two-year Report on Instructional Priorities for both schools and districts for the years 2006-07 through 2008-09. The report is intended to be neither a comprehensive plan nor a crystal-ball projection. Instead, it reports on literacy, math, science, preschool, ELLs, students with disabilities, and more rigorous instruction in the middle and high school grades. It is to be revised each year to reflect academic results in the previous year. It is intended to set ambitious but realizable and measurable interim goals that can be tracked throughout the year. This guide gives the procedures and content we seek in the report.

That's it. All these words do not count unless they connect to an improvement in the approximately 460 Abbott schools with their thousands of classroom teachers and hundreds of thousands of students. This is a never-ending search for what works in classrooms when most students are poor, almost one-fifth are classified as disabled, and where almost a third are still learning the English language. The variety across the Abbott districts and schools is enormous, which is why this guidance poses lots of questions and offers few answers. Dear reader, the answers are up to you.

Section

1

The Two-Year Report on Instructional Priorities

The purpose of this guidance is to help Abbott schools and districts organize evidence, stimulate reflection and discussion, and set down a few achievable instructional goals for the next two years. In short, our intent is to connect as closely as possible your analysis and diagnosis of instruction to what takes place in each of your classrooms.

PART I: THE SCHOOL TWO-YEAR REPORT ON INSTRUCTIONAL PRIORITIES

Each school will prepare a Two-Year Report on Instructional Priorities for the years beginning July 2006.

This report begins where the three-year operational plan leaves off (June 2006) and is due to the district's central office by November 1, 2005. The report should be concrete on what the school expects to be doing in the 2006-07 school year in literacy and math, while leaving considerable flexibility for years to follow. There are several things that the report is NOT:

- The report is not intended to be all-inclusive, but will focus on literacy, math, and science, and on how English-language learners (ELLs) and students classified as disabled are doing (special education);
- The report is not to be put together by a small committee, copied, submitted, and shelved, but should engage the entire school community including all teachers and the School Leadership Council (SLC);
- The report does not assume that all instructional problems can be solved in one or even three years, but it assumes that focus on a few instructional problems will yield noticeable progress; and
- The report is not a compliance document that lists all the requirements of Abbott that have or have not been installed, but should be very precise about the particular academic challenges faced by the teachers and students at your school.

The School's Two-Year Report on Instructional Priorities can only be effective and relevant if done in partnership with the district's central office.

The lessons cited in the Introduction include the fact that the most likely explanation for Abbott students faring poorly on state assessments is that they never received instruction on the content of the tests. It is illusory to expect that every school on its own should go through the core standards, determine how they should be organized and taught, decide what instructional materials that are aligned to them should be selected, and describe how teachers should be brought up to date on the content of the standards or strategies for helping struggling students. The district's central office bears the primary responsibility for developing a comprehensive curriculum that is closely aligned to state standards and tests, for selecting instructional materials like textbooks and software that will help teach what is required, and for determining how a continuously revised curriculum calls for district-initiated professional development. Thus, it is essential that, on these matters, all schools work with their central offices.

The second area in which the district must be involved is in providing data on student achievement and enrollment. For example, "continuously enrolled students" (CES) may include students who have transferred to a particular school from within the district within the last two years. The district central office should maintain a student-level database that makes the identification of such students relatively simple. Only the central office, for example, can confirm which kindergarten students attended which Abbott preschool program. The district is also responsible for collecting and analyzing student performance data on state assessments, non-state tests such as Terra Nova, and district-required formative (ongoing) assessments that can used to make comparisons across schools by *NCLB* and CES subgroups. The district can assist schools in interpreting student performance data, e.g., pointing to dissimilar results in demographically similar schools.

Reflecting on student work and instruction

The principal leads the School Leadership Council and the entire faculty in determining how the school will improve literacy and math instruction next year and science in the subsequent years. The report on Instructional Priorities must be submitted to the district by November 1, 2005. Since the Report begins with the 2006-07 year, the most recent state test data will have little value because 11th graders who passed HSPA will have graduated.

The report on Instructional Priorities should be written in a narrative form. It should show which student performance data were used to help set the priorities. The report should attach the data tables that were used to assess student performance by year, *NCLB* and CES subgroups. Here, the needs assessment required for the *NCLB* report will be helpful, since it includes the longitudinal student achievement data by *NCLB* subgroups. The more evidence that is cited, the more useful the report will be to the school, district and department.

The Report on Instructional Priorities should reflect the complexity of the school. There are no "right" answers or specific expectations about the diagnosis or prescription for the particular educational issues in any school. It is reasonable to assume that the categories of students who are having the greatest documented difficulty mastering the CCCS will receive the most attention. After the school community completes the analysis and prescriptions for literacy, math, science, ELLs and students with disabilities, there may not be anything else to report.

Depending on the grade levels served, the report may vary, for instance, a stand-alone kindergarten or a 5-7 middle-grades school will obviously have no state test results to analyze. However, all reports must address the following categories:

- Literacy and language arts
- Math
- Science
- English Language Learners
- Students with Disabilities

Schools and districts are free to include any other area or student subgroup they consider to be of highest priority going forward. The test, however, for whether to include additional priorities is the severity of the under-achievement and the number of students affected.

School Leadership Council

Abbott schools are distinguished by their use of a school-based body to advise on essential instructional, budgeting, and other issues. The SLC should work with the principal to assess and improve the instructional culture of the school. Its purpose is not to implement or manage programs. The SLC should serve as the "school improvement plan committee" required by *NCLB*. The SLC should review and approve both the school budget and the Report on Instructional Priorities.

The Report on Instructional Priorities and *NCLB*

These guidelines reflect the fullest possible integration of Abbott and *NCLB* requirements. Almost all of the student performance data that must be reported to *NCLB* annually can be used in evaluating and defending one's instructional priorities. The Report on Instructional Priorities should be consistent with the plans submitted for *NCLB* and include specific goals for improved student achievement that are simultaneously ambitious and credible.

Schools wishing to move to a unified Abbott and *NCLB* plan should review this year's Parallel Application directions and forms and address those requirements in their Report of Instructional Priorities, including schoolwide elements and CAPA recommendations. Having an approved schoolwide plan is a prerequisite for blending federal funds in the school budgets. Schools may also use the Title I-School in Need of Improvement Plan Report Essential Elements and Program Plan forms. Although some adjustments to these forms may be necessary when you complete the Parallel Application for the 2006-2007 school year based on the most current data available, the task will be made easier by having these forms included in your instructional priorities report. However, the priorities and the Report on Instructional Priorities should be the driving force for change at the school level.

The deadline for a school improvement plan for any Abbott school in the 4th year of "in need of improvement" status precedes the date for the report. That plan may provide both analysis and proposed solutions that may be helpful in drafting this report. The *NCLB* plan for correcting math and language arts problems must be consistent with the instructional priorities identified in the Abbott Report and the CAPA recommendations that were accepted in the prioritization process. It is likely that more items or details may be required in the *NCLB* report.

PART II. THE DISTRICT TWO-YEAR REPORT ON INSTRUCTIONAL PRIORITIES

The district report draws directly on the agreement growing out of the 2005 face-to-face conversation. Thus, the information required for the report is at hand; the priorities for focused action in the current and next school years should be easily transferred from the division and district exchange following the face-to-face refer to your consensus letter.

The report should be neither lengthy nor exhaustive, but should be written in narrative form with relevant statistical tables attached. It should focus on the diagnosis of why particular subgroups of students are not doing well and on the working hypotheses for improving their performance in the two years beginning July 2006.

The one area that is not covered in the school report, but that must be covered in the district report, is the particular action to be taken to improve struggling schools, particularly those in the 3rd, 4th, and 5th years of not making "adequate yearly progress." Each of these schools should be covered, together with the causes of "in need of improvement" status and the particular effort the district central office will make to improve student achievement in each school

In previous years, the Preschool Operational Plan was submitted separately from any district-wide document. This year, the preschool plan is integrated into the District Two-year Report on Instructional Priorities in an attempt to foster the development of a seamless pre-k teaching and learning agenda. Districts should complete this section first and then proceed to address instructional issues for grades K-12 identified during the summer face-to-face process.

Preschool Program: 2006-2007 and 2007-2008

Refer to the district Self Assessment and Validation System document and Improvement Plan, and describe how each component of the preschool program will be maintained and/or improved in 2006-2007 and 2007-2008. Address the following statements and/or questions below. Incorporate professional development plans when relevant. Address each area below in a narrative format.

Program Component Area: Recruitment and Outreach
What are the district's recruitment and outreach strategies for 06-07 and 07-08? Include enrollment projections against the estimated universe of eligible preschool students. If the district 06-07 projected enrollment is less than 90 percent of its preschool estimated universe, describe what the district will do to increase enrollment and by what targeted amount.

Program Component Area: Curriculum and Program
What measures will be taken to ensure high-quality implementation of the district's approved preschool curriculum? What specific support and training will the district provide, how will it measure quality, and what areas will be emphasized in professional development?

Program Component Area: Supporting English Language Learners
What steps will be taken to create optimal language environments, classroom activities and interactions for English Language Learners? How will both English and the child's home language be supported?

Program Component Area: Inclusion
What percentage of your students with disabilities are currently served in general education classrooms and what percentage will be served in general education classrooms over the next two years? How will you ensure that maximum inclusion numbers are achieved and that therapies are play-based and in the context of the classroom and curriculum? Do you have the appropriate staff – Preschool Intervention and Referral Specialists and Inclusion Master Teachers), and if not, what are your strategies for obtaining these?

Program Component Area: Transition
What are your current transition challenges? What are your plans to ensure smooth transitions among early intervention, preschool and kindergarten for each school year?

Program Component Area: Program Evaluation
What are your plans for program evaluation? How will results of classroom evaluations and child assessments be used? What other measures will be in place? (e.g., family/teacher surveys)

Program Component Area: Child Assessment
How do you measure children's progress? What are your procedures for screening children and to what extent are you using the Early Learning Assessment System (ELAS)? What other assessments are in place, and how are they used?

Program Component Area: Involving Families
How are the needs of families identified and provided for? How are unique needs accommodated? What opportunities will allow families to have input?

Face-to-Face Consensus

Consistent with the Abbott regulations, the report should consist of two sections. The first section covers the five foundational education standards and reflects the district's capacity to teach the CCCS:

- The status of the school district's P-12 curriculum gauged by the standards for curriculum;
- The status of the school district's professional development program against the standard;
- The status of the school district's capacity to use evidence of student performance and to report to schools, the public, and the department;
- The status and effectiveness of school district policies and practices to recruit, support, and retain qualified teachers and principals and to identify, mentor, and train potential leaders; and,
- The status of the school district's capacity to assist schools where a disproportionate number of students do not master the CCCS.

The second section should include specific instructional goals and practices for the following six areas:

- The alignment of the educational practices in the preschool program with the curricular and instructional practices of the school district's K-3 grades. The school district's status of, and plans for, fully implementing the practices and standards of intensive early literacy and middle grades literacy;
- The school district's status of, and plans for, assuring that every student is taught the CCCS for math with particular attention to the cumulative content required in grades 5 through 8 to prepare all students for the GEPA mathematics subtest and the specific steps to be taken in 2005-2006 to eliminate math courses with titles like "business math," "essentials of math," and "fundamentals of math;"
- The status of, and plans for, assuring that every student is taught the CCCS for science;
- With respect to the three instructional objectives above, the status of ELLs;
- With respect to preschool, literacy, math, and science, the status and performance of students classified as disabled; and
- The current status of efforts to plan for the conversion of large schools serving students in grades 6-12 to small schools or small learning communities.

NCLB Districts In Need of Improvement

Once again, the requirements for district compliance with *NCLB* and expectations for Abbott districts are closely matched with the consequence that much of what is required for revising the district report on instructional priorities should already have been produced by districts for their recently submitted Parallel Application (2005-2006). The goal is the same: to identify the obstacles preventing students from mastering the CCCS. For *NCLB*, the district must review the plans for each school individually and lay out the steps to be taken to improve student performance, support teachers in improving instruction, attract and retain highly qualified teachers, and more deeply involve parents in the academic lives of their children. Districts that do not make adequate yearly progress for two consecutive years also must develop a plan, in consultation with parents, school staff and other stakeholders, that focuses on and analyzes deficiencies in school leadership, governance, curriculum and instruction and fiscal practices.

Since the goals of *NCLB* and Abbott are similar, there should be a unified plan at the district level that integrates all federal resources to assist all schools identified as "in need of improvement."

DOE-district review of the District Two-year Report on Instructional Priorities

The following checklist has been developed to guide the department's review of the report on instructional priorities. It is not a compliance review. It is, instead, an efficient way to get to the fundamental issues in providing high-quality instruction. It recognizes the difficulty Abbott districts confront in competing with other districts for talented educators and in developing effective approaches for a student population in rapid flux. The checklist will not work unless it is answered candidly and directly. We do not assume all "yes" answers for any district. The foregoing indicators begin and end with the longitudinal, disaggregated evidence of student performance.

Checklist for District/DOE Review

	Yes	No
1. Highly qualified teachers in every classroom		
• There are no teachers with emergency certificates.		
• There are no permanent substitutes or "19-day subs."		
• The district is successful in recruiting for specialties in short supply, i.e. special education, bilingual, ESL, math, science.		
• The district recruits alternate route teachers.		
• The district, not individual schools, decides the priorities for professional development.		
• Professional development combines an assessment of student performance with an assessment of how well-prepared our teachers are to teach the content of the core standards.		
• Professional development exceeds the state minimum of 100 hours/five years.		
• District policy encourages weekly grade-level and departmental meetings.		
2. Highly qualified principals in every school:		
• The most important criterion in each principal's evaluation is academic performance.		
• Principals participate regularly in district-organized professional development.		
• Principals meet regularly to discuss instructional issues and practices.		
• The district brings together principals with similar instructional problems, e.g. growing ELL populations or fourth-grade math problems.		
• The district identifies, encourages, and challenges teachers, supervisors, and others who might make strong principals.		
• Principals in schools making inadequate progress are warned and supported, but removed if the trend continues.		
3. A coherent, aligned district curriculum.		
• There is a district-wide curriculum aligned with the CCCS from preschool through twelfth grade.		
• A teacher at any grade level or teaching any subject will know from the curriculum the content he/she is expected to teach, the sequence and pacing of the instruction, and how student progress can be measured.		
• The curriculum is the subject of continuous scrutiny and revision, when necessary.		
• The cluster results on state assessments and the item analyses on non-state assessments are torn apart for curricular alignment.		

• The preschool curriculum is closely aligned with the K-3 curriculum		
• The district, not schools or technology coordinators, selects the instructional software to ensure its alignment with the district curriculum.		
• The curriculum includes instructional materials selected for their effectiveness with ELL students.		
4. Continuous, rigorous assessment of student work.		
• The district uses an electronic student database that includes pre-K students.		
• The district has identified all students continuously enrolled in district schools for three years or more.		
• Each school receives a district-prepared analysis of state and other test results with item and cluster analyses that compares school-to-school performance within the district and with other Abbott, DFG, and statewide results		
• The central office reports the national origin and home literacy survey results for all ELL students		
• The district reports the percentage of third-year ELLs who were proficient on state tests and tracks the proficiency of exited ELLs to graduation		
• The district compares test results of speech and specific learning disability (SLD) classified students with "general" students and tracks the classified students who exit SPED.		
5. Underperforming schools.		
• The district identifies underperforming schools for special attention, including a joint diagnosis of instructional problems and a road map for improved teaching and learning.		
• The district's evaluation of the principal of an underperforming school includes agreement on the specific work to be done and measurable indicators of progress.		
• The district has conducted an evaluation of each classroom teacher to determine strengths and weaknesses and agreed on a professional development program for each.		
• The district, principal, and SLC have agreed on a plan that complies with *NCLB* requirements and sets school-wide goals and indicators for 2005-06.		
• The principal of each underperforming schools reports to one central office person, who shares responsibility for school improvement results.		
6. Service to schools, teachers, and other customers		
• Central office professionals are evaluated on how well they serve the district's "customers."		
• The district uses anonymous "customer satisfaction" surveys of		

principals, a random sample of teachers, and other school-based professionals. If "no" we will initiate such surveys this year.		
• All textbooks and other instructional materials and supplies are delivered to all schools in advance of school opening.		
• Repair orders for broken windows, graffiti, heating, and other building problems are handled quickly and with as little intrusion on instruction as possible.		
• A student referred for evaluation by a child study team is reviewed within twenty days and a diagnosis completed within ninety days.		
• Nutritious and tasty food is served for lunch.		

2006-2007 Budget

As is the case with all other elements of this year's guidance, budget preparation and review for 2006-2007 will be driven by the relationship between school and district spending and improvement in student achievement. The department expects to complete its review of most budgets during April.

Please note that the Commissioner's regulations governing the preparation and approval of the FY 2007 budgets for the Abbott districts and schools were not promulgated in time for this guidance. What follows assumes that only minor changes in last year's regulations will be made, but be aware that the steps outlined are not based on regulation.

In its July 23, 2003 order, the NJ Supreme Court intensified its attention to the effective and efficient expenditure of Abbott funds. In it, the court directed the department to create a new standard for both "efficiency" and "effectiveness" and establish procedures to review the 2003-04 Abbott proposed non instructional and central office expenditures. The standards for judging efficiency and effectiveness were in place last year, and it is our intent to apply them to the 2006-2007 budget in accordance with the Abbott rules. As was the case last year, the standards will be applied to all expenditures, including, of course, instructional spending at the school level.

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Please note that draft school budgets for 2006-2007 based on the 2005-2006 school budgets are to be prepared by the districts and distributed to schools by November 15. School budgets are to be submitted to the district on or around December 15, 2005 and to the department by mid-January, 2006.

Much of the schedule is determined by the date of the Governor's Budget Message which contains state aid recommendations to the Legislature and the statutory February 25 date for submitting Abbott district budgets to the department. While the court has approved a budget schedule that permits departmental approval no later than the last business day in May, it is our intention to advance that date for Abbott districts. Districts that submit complete budgets electronically on time and that meet the formal budget guidance that the department will provide in February, can expect an approval in April.

Section

2

Improving Literacy and Learning in Elementary Schools

LITERACY is the starting point in meeting the obligation of every Abbott elementary school to teach each student to read and write on grade level by the end of third grade. The content of the literacy section of the Report on Instructional Priorities will vary in accordance with how close any school and district is toward realizing this goal. Schools in which a high percentage of students are proficient and advanced proficient on the NJASK3 and NJASK4 language arts literacy sub-tests would have very short reports. However, schools with high percentages of recent immigrant arrivals and/or high special education enrollments will have to describe a more complicated picture. With all schools, there will be a student performance profile that goes back at least four years and reports all *NCLB* subgroups and Continuously Enrolled Students (CES), as well as a status report on how well Intensive Early Literacy (IEL) has been implemented.

Data check

How well are we doing to reach our goal of making every fourth grader a strong reader and writer?

On the 2002 ESPA language arts section
Percentage of tested 4th graders in non-Abbott districts found not proficient: 16.1
Percentage of tested 4th graders in Abbott districts found not proficient: 38.9

On the 2005 NJASK4 language arts section
Percentage of tested 4th graders in non-Abbott districts found not proficient: 14.5.
Percentage of tested 4th graders in Abbott districts found not proficient: 34.0.

A quick glance shows that Abbott fourth graders did slightly better in 2005 than in 2002. Their peers in other districts also did slightly better, which led to a narrowing of the achievement gap by more than three percentage points in three years. Non-Abbott students who were not special education or ELL achieved 91.9 percent proficient or advanced proficient last year; and there is every reason to expect the same percentage for Abbott general education students.

The fact that more than one-third of Abbott fourth graders have not achieved proficiency constitutes an *educational emergency*. Moreover, this is one goal we know how to achieve, where there is consensus about what to do among researchers and practitioners. That consensus is reflected in the Abbott regulations, these guidelines, and in the results achieved when the required practices are implemented. In short, we can do this. While the recent rate of closing the achievement gap with other New Jersey students is steady at about one percentage point a year, we can't wait another twenty years to

make our goal because tens of thousands of Abbott students would enter adulthood with the crippling disadvantage of not being able to read well enough to function successfully in life.

Every teacher should help construct the school profile, including the status of literacy and math efforts

The checklists found within this document are intended to facilitate universal teacher participation in assessing what works and what doesn't work and in hypothesizing about potential solutions. There are separate checklists for math and literacy that should be completed by **all** teachers responsible for either subject. The checklists are intended to make conversations among teachers more specific and focused. To ensure candor, the individual sheets are not to be shared with supervisors, principals, or the central office.

Incorporating preschool.

New Jersey is making the nation's largest investment to provide a high-quality preschool education. The research-backed expectation is that this investment will pay both long-term and immediate benefits to the students, their families, and the entire state. The Abbott preschool experience should be organically connected to kindergarten in terms of *curriculum* and *orientation*. We are asking elementary schools to identify kindergarten students who have attended an Abbott preschool and the particular program attended. Further, kindergarten teachers should receive portfolios from each child and should have firsthand knowledge of those preschool programs supplying the largest percentage of new students.

The preschool-kindergarten curriculum articulation is the responsibility of the central office working with the preschool standards (i.e. Preschool Teaching and Learning Expectations: Standards of Quality). Anecdotal reports across the state indicate that kindergarten teachers are making major adjustments in their teaching as they receive students who are socially and educationally better prepared. Such changes should be reflected in the Two-Year Report on Instructional Priorities.

Each Abbott district should prepare an analysis of the results on the NJASK3 language arts and math tests for 2005, the first year in which "graduates" of the Abbott preschool initiative were tested. The analysis should show the results for those students who attended both as three- and four- year-olds, those who attended only one year, and those who did not attend at all. Results should also be broken out between total students enrolled in district- or community provider-operated programs. Since only about one-fifth of eligible three- and four-year-olds participated in preschool in 1999 and there were wide variations in quality, there may not be a significant difference between students from Abbott preschool and those who did not participate.

The fact that more than one-third of Abbott fourth graders have not achieved proficiency constitutes an educational emergency.

Intensive Early Literacy

The department has been unusually precise in setting standards and practices for developing early literacy in kindergarten through third grade—and for the best reasons. First, if there's just one thing an elementary school must accomplish, it is to make every child a strong reader. Second, respected research strongly supports departmental literacy policies. Third, these standards and practices have been shown to work consistently in Abbott and non-Abbott districts, as well as schools with superior literacy rates.

Abbott regulations have mandated the ingredients of IEL for three years, but we know that instructional practice is rarely changed by regulation alone. The department has agreements with many Abbott districts covering the implementation of these ingredients during 2005-06. Every Abbott kindergarten through third-grade classroom should have the physical ingredients in place (e.g., a classroom library and observable small learning centers for writing, computers, and reading) and a schedule for bringing all teachers up to date on reading aloud, guided reading, screening instruments such as DIBELs or DRA, and how to work with struggling students.

By September 2006—the first school year covered in the report—the emphasis should no longer be on introducing the IEL elements, but on how reading and writing can be deepened and broadened for every student. Even if every student were proficient on the 2005 NJASK3 and ASK4 language arts tests, literacy would still be the first topic of the two-year report.

Improving math instruction and student performance

New Jersey adopted more rigorous national mathematics standards in 1997, but many districts and schools are only recently catching up by purchasing instructional materials (e.g., "Chicago math") that are well-aligned to the CCCS and providing more professional development on how to use them. Schools and the district central office need to collaborate in diagnosing the evidence from NJASK3 and 4 and any commercial tests that are used in first and second grades. (Commercial tests aligned to New Jersey's standards offer item analyses that can help pinpoint skill and content deficiencies.)

Data Check

Have new math standards caught the Abbott districts flat-footed?

On the 2002 ESPA mathematics section
Percentage of tested 4th graders in non-Abbott districts found not proficient: 24.5
Percentage of tested 4th graders in Abbott districts found not proficient: 57.4

On the 2005 NJASK4 mathematics section
Percentage of tested 4th graders in non-Abbott districts found not proficient: 15.7
Percentage of tested 4th graders in Abbott districts found not proficient: 35.7

The results in 2005 showed a broad and significant increase in the proficiency of New Jersey's fourth graders, particularly in the Abbott districts. Over four years, the Abbott districts closed the "not-proficient" gap from 33 to 20 percentage points. These gains were achieved in a consistent fashion. From 2002 to 2003, the Abbott districts gained 3.7 percentage points; from 2003 to 2004, the Abbott districts leapt 6.1 points; and from 2004 to 2005, the Abbott districts advanced another 3.1 percentage points. That said, to have more than a third of all fourth graders not be able to pass the test is not acceptable performance.

Many districts report that teachers in the middle grades struggle with a gap between the content of math they are now expected to teach and what they were prepared to teach in their collegiate training. The introduction of new curricular materials will require professional development opportunities that exceed those typically offered by textbook publishers. The differences across or within schools may require a careful, joint school/district review of the content and skill mastery of each teacher. Additional grade-level or subject area common planning time may have to be built into teacher schedules beginning with the 2005-06 school year. While professional development is a shared responsibility between the district central office and each school, the lead must come from the central office.

The same kind of longitudinal subgroup analysis required for literacy must be prepared for math. Again, *all* classroom teachers should help diagnose any instructional problems and recommend steps that can be taken next school year to improve teaching and learning in math. Teachers, principals and supervisors need to be candid about the familiarity of teachers with math concepts and materials and their daily use in the classroom.

Each school shall prepare a narrative on how math instruction and learning will be improved in the 2006-07 school year. The report should cite the student performance data that underlie its recommendations. There should be a section that depicts the proposed pacing and sequence for whatever materials, training, classroom support or other steps are to be introduced as well as interim measures (e.g., all fourth and fifth grade teachers will receive a full day of professional development before school opens, three classroom visits to observe math instruction, and a half-day training in November to update content on estimation.)

Improving instruction for students classified disabled (Special Education) and for English language learners (ELL)

Given the priority placed on educating *all* students and *NCLB*'s requirements for both students with disabilities and ELL students, this recommendation may appear unnecessary. The 11 special education classifications cover a broad spectrum of physical, emotional, neurological, and sensory problems and; ELL students present an equally diverse range of problems and circumstances. General patterns discerned in the evaluation of literacy and math performance may not hold up when the performance of students with disabilities and ELL students is addressed.

The first question is, Are students with disabilities and ELL students expected to master the same curriculum taught to our general education students? If the answer is "no," then students in these subgroups are not receiving the instruction necessary to master the CCCS.

Other questions are, What proportion of the instruction of ELL and special education students occurs in "general" classrooms taught by either the full-time teacher or co-taught by a special education, bilingual, or ESL teacher? Does the school try to maximize co-teaching (a.k.a. "push-in") instruction over "pull-out?" Addressing these issues may provide some clues as to both the diagnosis and prescriptions for effective instruction.

A school with a high concentration of ELL students of the same language may offer native language instruction that will ease the transition to English mastery. The Home Language Survey provides particularly useful information to make the initial pedagogical judgment about native/English language emphasis (e.g., students whose families are literate in the first language will make the transition to English more smoothly when taught in both languages).

A third check for ELL students is to review the performance of students who have tested out of bilingual/ESL. The standard for testing out is lower than the proficiency standard on state tests. A year or two later there should be no difference among former ELL students and their "general education" classmates on state, district, and classroom assessments. If former ELL students are performing below expectation, the bilingual/ESL curriculum and instruction require analysis and modification.

Again, the collection and analysis of both longitudinal and subgroup data on Special Education (SPED) and ELL students are essential first steps to determining a school's instructional priorities for next year.

Effective instruction requires continuous assessment of student performance

In January 2005, the Department distributed a series of Excel workbooks to be used in organizing and displaying student performance data for elementary and middle grades that could be used to prepare the 2005 Report on Instructional Priorities. A majority of Abbott districts used EdSolution.org to help prepare their data; other districts used the supplied workbooks or their own database program. The expectation for this year is that the Abbott districts and schools will update last year's reports with the 2005 test results to respond to the items found in the data appendix. These data are basic to any instructional review and include those that must be reported for *NCLB* purposes. In most cases, the district central office will have to supply some of the data to fully populate the spreadsheet, e.g. "Continuously Enrolled Student—District."

While those tasks appear to call for the collection and analysis of a lot of data, most schools will find they would benefit from including additional fields in order to "drill down" to accurately diagnose their instructional problems. For a school with a large immigrant population, for example, it may be useful to track students by their country of origin to see if there are any patterns that might be useful in placing new arrivals. Kindergarten teachers need additional information on their students' preschool experiences, such as their participation in "wrap around" services. Schools that offer after-school or summer programs will want to track how students who participate do in their regular classrooms.

Assessing student needs and improved instruction means reflection and continuous judgment

While it is possible that the answers to what is holding students back might leap out from tables of data, it is far more likely that useful conclusions will emerge from thoughtful discussion, exchanges among teachers about what works and doesn't work, and teachers reviewing student work from other classes. This process should be led by the principal and involve every teacher, the central office and the School Leadership Council (SLC). The discussion should identify those problems that are best explained by policies and practices at the district level, at the school level, and at the grade or classroom level.

The following checklists are intended to help diagnose instructional difficulties and to figure out what to do. There are separate checklists for literacy and math. These are not "tests" or compliance documents. The checklists are not comprehensive. Consider them a starting point to grade-level or school-wide conversations. Everyone should also ask the question: "Are we doing things that just don't work?"

To encourage candor, individual teacher checklists are not to be shared with the central office or DOE. They should be filled out by *all* teachers and discussed by teachers in grade-level meetings. Summaries of the teacher checklists (but not individual forms) should be reviewed by the SLC and principal to produce a school-wide assessment as a part of the report on instructional priorities. When "no" is checked on the school-wide form, a narrative response should be prepared.

Literacy and Mathematics
in Elementary Schools Checklist
2005-06

Intensive Early Literacy	**Yes**	**No**
1. The Intensive Early Literacy standards have been implemented in all classrooms as evidenced by:		
• Writing is emphasized in all grades beginning with kindergarten and takes many forms: narrative, poetry, exposition, description, etc.		
• An uninterrupted literacy block of at least 90 minutes daily; 120 minutes for ELL and students more than one year behind grade level.		
• Teachers that have been trained to use screening instruments that assess the level of each child and help to form small instructional groups, e.g., DIBELs, DRA.		
• At least three identifiable small learning centers for reading, computers, and writing.		
• A classroom library with at least 300 titles that are consistent with the district curriculum and which include books specially selected to meet the needs of this year's class, e.g. native language books for ELLs.		
• As the classroom teacher, I selected many of the titles for the classroom library.		
2. We use a district curriculum and a district-set comprehensive reading program that is aligned with the NJ CCCS with citations of the connections to specific standards.		
• My lesson plans are checked by the principal or a supervisor to ensure that I'm teaching the curriculum.		
• The curriculum includes six- to ten-week units with benchmarks for measuring progress through and at the end of the period.		
• I receive regular professional development to keep up with curriculum changes, to upgrade my content mastery when necessary, and to work with my colleagues on how to improve our teaching.		
3. Technology is fully integrated into the instructional practice of all classrooms as evidenced by:		
• Enough classroom computers to form a small learning center.		
• Computers that are networked, connected to the Internet, with broadband sufficient for personalized lessons for each student.		
• Schools working on making computer time an integral part of instruction.		

Intensive Early Literacy	Yes	No
• My students spend at least 90 minutes a week on the computer as a part of their instruction.		
4. Assessment of student work is continuous, measured, and set against curricular and instructional standards that are clear, specific, and known by all teachers as evidenced by:		
• The teacher knows which students are from families where no or very little English is spoken.		
• Our school uses non-state tests in 1st, 2nd, and 5th grades and we go over the item analyses to determine the content and skills where students are struggling.		
• Students with disabilities and ELL students are taught the same curriculum used for general students.		
• Deeper assessments are used for students who are falling behind.		
• When SPED or ESL/Bilingual students are enrolled in my class, I co-teach with Special Education, ESL/Bilingual, or other specialists.		
• Standardized test results are shared with, and explained to, teachers, parents, students, and SLC members.		
5. The school expects 100 percent of its unclassified students to be readers by third grade as evidenced by:		
• At least 75 percent of the school's students can read at grade level by the end of first grade.		
• ELLs are assessed and placed in appropriate native language reading, English-only, ESL, and/or sheltered English instruction.		
• Dual language classes are available for English Language Learners, if needed.		
• Inclusion is achieved by maximizing in-class instruction with special education teachers or special education-certified general classroom teachers.		
• The school exchanges visits with preschool programs whose "graduates" attend the school's kindergarten, and kindergarten teachers receive a portfolio of their students' pre-K work.		
6. Teachers have at least a weekly opportunity to exchange information on effective teaching strategies and materials.		

Mathematics	Yes	No
1. The district curriculum is aligned with the NJ CCCS with citations of the connections to specific standards and Cumulative Progress Indicators (CPIs), as evidenced by.		
• Students work together and are taught in math centers, where they are grouped by different skill/mastery levels		
• The mathematics program emphasizes the development of mathematical thinking and not just memorization and arithmetic skills.		
• Students are required to communicate about mathematics orally and in writing, to explain their reasoning and to make connections among mathematical strands and the real world.		
• The district assures that mathematics print materials, instructional software, and manipulative materials are aligned with the five CCCS math standards (the four content standards—Number and Numerical Operations, Geometry and Measurement, Patterns and Algebra, and Data Analysis, Probability, and Discrete Mathematics -- and the Mathematical Processes Standard).		
• The curriculum includes multiple assessments and benchmarks to measure progress in each content area.		
• Learning styles: Students are offered choices of real life, auditory, visual, and kinesthetic applications of mathematics skills and concepts within each cluster.		
• Math across the curriculum: Teachers apply mathematics within each cluster and in other subjects: social studies, language arts, science, technology, art, music and physical education.		
• Students are given regular opportunities to manipulate objects and models to represent mathematical concepts.		
• Teachers are given professional development to become acquainted with curriculum changes; to upgrade their content mastery when necessary; to differentiate instruction for groups of students; and to plan cross-curricular mathematics applications.		
2. Mathematics is integrated into technology in classrooms and in computer labs, as evidenced by:		
• Software is aligned with NJCCCS at each grade level.		
• Technology applications do not reduce time required for mathematics instruction.		
• Technology provides experiences for advanced levels of critical thinking, simulation and application of skills. See http://www.doe.mass.edu/edtech/etreport/1998/milken.html		

Whole School Reform.

With WSR models having been implemented in almost 300 Abbott elementary schools beginning seven years ago, the department has learned a lot about their role and effectiveness. These lessons are important to the treatment of WSR implementation in the Report on Instructional Priorities:

- Most WSR models are not ***instructional***, but tend to deal with related issues like school governance, social supports for students, or culture;
- Among the few models that are instructional, some are not closely aligned to New Jersey's Core standards. Thus, even if perfectly and completely implemented, WSR models may not contribute to student mastery of the CCCS, which is the standard of the Supreme Court to define a constitutional education;
- The standards, practices, and culture of most WSR can be fully absorbed within three years; and
- In districts with weak central office support for schools or with untested leadership, WSR models can provide structure and support for the school community.

With these lessons in mind, it is assumed that all Abbott elementary schools will seek to implement the spirit and objectives of "whole school reform" even if they are no longer under contract with a "Whole School Reform" vendor. However, these are choices that are best made in conjunction with the district central office and approved by the department.

The department has encouraged Abbott districts to develop a coherent and comprehensive instructional design called the "Alternative Whole School Reform Design" that can be used in all elementary schools. The idea is simply to merge the benefits of systematic attention to some issues covered by WSR models, such as governance, school culture, and parent involvement, with the focus on standards-based instruction emphasized by the Supreme Court and this guidance document.

If a school has been under contract with the same WSR provider for three or more years, then its report should include an analysis of the contribution the model is making to the improved academic performance of its students. In particular, the report should indicate what standards, practices, or culture of the model have not been absorbed after three years of continuous effort and why. If the model's lessons have been learned, then the report should indicate what formal relationship, if any, makes sense going forward.

Each school's report should include its history of WSR adoption and implementation, noting the years when formal contracts were in place with an approved WSR developer.

Section

3

Increasing Literacy and Mastery of the Core Curriculum Content Standards in the Middle Grades

THE MIDDLE YEARS, fifth through eighth grades, is the "make or break" period for students in the Abbott districts. With the advent of the Core Curriculum Content Standards in 1997, the academic expectations for middle grades students have become more rigorous and daunting, particularly in math and science. For students who have left fourth grade without strong reading and writing skills, the middle grades can be a frustrating journey without much hope of breaking out. Abbott middle grade teachers face all the usual problems associated with the middle grade students—adolescence and increased peer pressures unfriendly to academic concentration—plus having a disproportionate number of under-prepared students. Consider the consequences as depicted in the Data Check.

Data Check

Number of Abbott 8th graders who were enrolled at the time of the 2002 GEPA: 16,941
Number of Abbott 11th graders who were enrolled at the time of the 2005 HSPA: 11,602
Percentage of students in Abbott districts that "melted away" between the 8th and 11th grades: 31.5
Percentage of students in non-Abbott districts that "melted away" between the 8th and 11th grades: 3.4

We now can see that Abbott districts in which 8th graders perform poorly on the GEPA tests are the Abbott districts with the highest dropout rates. This unsurprising connection needs to be broken, and it must start well before high school if students are to have a fighting chance to graduate from high school.

Of course, not all the drop-off can be ascribed to drop-outs since some students seek non-public alternatives beginning with 9th grade. But there is little argument that rising 9th graders who are the least equipped to handle college preparatory work in high school are the most at risk of not graduating four years later.

The middle grades are caught, well, in the middle. Early literacy and what happens in elementary schools receive a lot of attention. There's a pretty strong consensus about what needs to happen with kids between preschool and 4th grade. On the other end, a lot of national attention is devoted to what to do with large comprehensive high schools that don't work. In New Jersey, new standards for small learning communities, academies, or small schools are being tested in four Abbott pilot districts with the intention of "personalizing" the high school experience. While the same standards are to apply to large middle schools once they've been tested, the emphasis is plainly on high schools.

We now have a lot of evidence that the Abbott districts were much slower than other districts to adjust their instruction to the NJCCCS that were adopted in 1997. While this is dramatically the case with math, the state test results suggest strongly that many Abbott students are not being prepared in grades five through seven for the GEPA tests in language arts and science, as well. It is against this backdrop that the following guidance is offered for Abbott districts and their schools with middle grade students.

Middle grades mathematics

About two-thirds of Abbott 8th graders can't pass the GEPA math test (it's about one-third "partially proficient" in other districts). We have an educational emergency on our hands. So this year, we are giving heavier emphasis to mathematics in the middle grades. A quick look at the "Data Check" will provide all the explanation needed as to why. The math GEPA is very difficult and we now know that intense drilling and "test prep" during the 8th grade will not prepare students sufficiently to pass it. Rather, preparation for students and teachers must begin systematically in the 5th grade.

Data check

Percentage of Abbott 8th graders not proficient on the 2002 GEPA math section: 70.4
Percentage of non-Abbott 8th graders not proficient on the 2002 GEPA math section: 35.1
Percentage of Abbott 8th graders not proficient on the 2005 GEPA math section: 66.0
Percentage of non-Abbott 8th graders not proficient on the 2005 GEPA math section: 30.6

Of 165 Abbott schools taking the 2002 GEPA math section, number that exceeded the non-Abbott proficiency rate: 13
Of 165 Abbott schools taking the 2005 GEPA math section, number that exceeded the non-Abbott proficiency rate: 8
Of 13 Abbott schools exceeding the 2002 GEPA math section non-Abbott proficiency rate, number in Hudson Co.: 8
Of 8 Abbott schools exceeding the 2005 GEPA math section non-Abbott proficiency rate, number in Hudson Co.: 4

One reasonable measure of Abbott proficiency is to compare Abbott student performance with students in other districts. The 2004 GEPA math results produced an interesting pattern. Most of the schools in which students were doing <u>better</u> than non-Abbott students were in Hudson County. This is not explained by proximity to Manhattan, otherwise there would be little we could do. Rather, some districts in Hudson County have carefully dissected the math standards and worked backwards from the high school graduation requirements to the ninth grade and from the GEPA standards to 5th grade, to determine the cumulative knowledge and skills (e.g. algebraic reasoning, manipulation of data,) that students need to graduate. They put a heavy emphasis on math concepts and skills in the middle grades as the pre-requisite to algebra mastery, which is widely accepted as the gatekeeper course for college entry. The Hudson County achievement levels permit credible optimism that the New Jersey standards are within the reach of almost all Abbott students, however difficult they may now appear.

The emphasis on math will require a close partnership between schools and their central offices since only the central office can:

- Do the important work of connecting the CCCS to a roadmap for classroom instruction;
- Develop 6-10 week units of instruction and assessments, project-based learning, and district-wide indicators to measure interim progress;
- Determine what professional development is required to bring teachers up to date with more rigorous content and the skills to help struggling students;
- Be certain that instructional materials and software are not just aligned to the CCCS, but are accessible and sensible for teachers and students; and,
- Produce comparative student achievement data with other district schools and other Abbott and non-Abbott districts.

Most Abbott districts have by now adopted instructional materials that reflect national and New Jersey math standards, but most of them also report that having aligned materials is not enough. The process of assisting and encouraging teachers to use the new materials with confidence and ease is a slow one. The number of professional development hours required frequently exceeds the number of hours in the union contract or district schedule. Since not all middle grades math is taught by certified math teachers, this places a special premium on sustained and systematic professional development opportunities for fourth- through sixth-grade teachers in self-contained classrooms. In addition to formal professional development sessions, many districts are struggling to provide sufficient in-classroom support as new materials are taught.

In districts like West New York, strong results follow from the use of multiple opportunities for staff learning that reflect national and state professional development standards. The district ensures that all in-house training is followed by monthly discussions, journal writing and other follow-up. Beyond the staff development days specified in the union contract, all teachers have daily common planning time.

To determine whether there are gaps in the curriculum, groups of teachers meet to examine what was being taught in each grade and make sure that it is a sufficient foundation for the subsequent grade. Once this process is completed, the district develops mid-year and end-of-the-year assessments to measure student mastery of the content. Analysis of the course history of students that graduated through the SRA process revealed that many of them did not take the proper sequence of math courses, beginning with algebra 1 in 9th grade. Consequently, the district offers a three-week mathematics intervention program in August to all students who are partially proficient on the GEPA. Small class sizes and daily instruction by skilled teachers in key pre-algebra topics (integers, rational numbers, order of operations, algebraic expressions and simple linear equations and inequalities) in the weeks just before the start of school have resulted in much higher rates of completion of algebra among program participants. The few who do not succeed in the summer take a pre-algebra course.

West New York has two mathematics supervisors, one for elementary grades and a second for middle and high school grades. Both employ a variety of district and school-based strategies to support mathematics teachers. There is a 12-teacher committee for mathematics in the elementary schools that discusses the essential questions of mathematics under the guidance of the elementary mathematics supervisor and prepares a document for all the elementary teachers. In addition, there are technology trainers working with a cohort of teachers to ensure technology infusion in the schools.

Not surprisingly, there is very little turnover among West New York's mathematics teachers and over 90% of them meet the NCLB highly qualified teacher standard at the secondary level.

Mobilizing for greater literacy

The middle grades (5 through 8) are the "make or break" years.

Last year, the department introduced new standards and practices to strengthen reading and writing in the middle grades and to provide more effective help for students reading below grade level. Those standards were based on a strong consensus about "what works" among distinguished scholars and practitioners who served on the Commissioner's Task Force on Middle Grades Literacy. A copy of their report can be found on the department's Web site at www.nj.gov/njded/genfo/midliteracy.html.

More than half of Abbott 8th graders did not pass the language arts test in 2005. Looking at the "Data Check" suggests a lack of progress for all New Jersey students for unexplained reasons, since 2002.

Data check

Percentage of Abbott eighth grade students proficient on the 2002 GEPA language arts section: 44.8
Percentage of non-Abbott eighth grade students proficient on the 2002 GEPA language arts section: 79.8
Percentage of Abbott students proficient on 2005 GEPA LAL: 46.8
Percentage of non-Abbott eighth grade students proficient on the 2005 GEPA language arts section: 78.6

Since the Abbott middle grades literacy standards and practices were not published until late in the 2004-05 school year, it is not surprising that there was no impact on the 2005 results. Changing classroom practice takes time, and when students are older and further behind, the changes will not produce immediate or dramatic results (as can happen with first graders, for example). As can be seen, the very slight closing of the gap (one percentile per year) with non-Abbott districts is partly due to the fact that scores in other districts at the same time as those in Abbott districts rose.

The September 2005 school year should open with the ingredients of middle grades literacy plainly visible:

- Language arts instruction should be at least 80 and up to 120 uninterrupted minutes.
  - Students two or more years below grade level receive at least 40 minutes more for the full 120 minutes; and
  - ELLs should receive at least 120 minutes a day, including 30 minutes of oral language proficiency development.
- In self-contained middle grades classrooms or in rooms dedicated to language arts, there should be libraries with at least 300 titles that are particularly matched to the interests and needs of students in those classrooms, including novels and short stories that appeal to gender differences;
- One should be able to spot small learning centers in self-contained classrooms where teachers and students spend much more time working together in small groups and on project-based learning activities;

- Writing projects should be frequent, be assigned in math and science, as well as language arts and subject to revision and more revision, with recent high-quality work displayed for all to see; and
- Language arts instruction should begin to spread across other subjects so that serious writing is a part of social studies and science and students are challenged by projects that include two or more disciplines, e.g., a research paper on the scientific discoveries that spurred the Industrial Revolution.

In K-8 schools that have successfully implemented the ingredients of Intensive Early Literacy, the transition to these practices should be relatively smooth. The content of the middle grades literacy standards is familiar because it builds on the same principles of a print-rich environment, concentrated and uninterrupted instructional time, small-group instruction, and early attention to students who fall behind. In free-standing middle schools, the introduction of new practices and standards may be much more difficult. Departmentalized instruction is the norm and many teachers in the sixth to eighth grade span have no strong background in teaching reading and writing. "Leave it to the English teachers," may be a common sentiment. There may also be greater resistance to introducing instructional techniques like small learning centers, read-alouds, and process writing that are associated with the elementary grades.

As with math, schools cannot implement middle grades literacy without a partnership with the central office. It is the district that must assist its schools by doing the following:

- Ensuring that there is a coherent district curriculum that lays out the grade-level and subject-area curricula so that literacy is not just in the realm of "language arts," but is a part of the instruction for science and social studies—any subjects that require reading or spoken and written English;
- Engaging the participation of teachers by grade and subject and subject area supervisors in the writing and continuous rewriting of the curriculum;
- Specifying clearly what is expected by grade and subject in eight- to ten-week units for teachers, parents, and students;
- Selecting instructional materials that are closely aligned with the CCCS and district curricula and ensuring that teachers and students know how to use them;
- Laying out clear interim goals with district-wide interim measures of progress (by the time results of state tests arrive, students have moved on to the next grade); and
- Evaluating the mastery of teachers of the curricular content and preparing them for the introduction of cross-subject teaching.

Science as the third NCLB subject.

The 2006-07 school year will be the first in which the results of the state science tests will be used to determine whether schools are making adequate annual progress. This alone will provide a strong incentive for districts and schools to undertake the same kind of curriculum assessment that is required for success with literacy and math. At this writing, the Abbott division has not completed any useful analysis of results on the GEPA science tests nor formulated recommendations to accompany those for literacy and math. However, schools and districts are asked to incorporate a status report on science achievement and plans for improved teaching and learning in their two-year reports on instructional priorities.

Abbott districts are the most likely first destination for families with English language learners in New Jersey

The evidence is overwhelming that, along with the advent of the CCCS and *NCLB*, the biggest change for most Abbott districts is the rapid increase in students whose first language is other than English (primarily Spanish). The growth in ELL students poses a tough, but not impossible, job for educators. That is why each school and district must give attention to ELLs in their reports (this can be a one-sentence report in the few Abbott districts that have no ELLs).

The native language literacy of the families and the prior academic preparation of the students have a lot to do with the most productive instructional approach to ELLs. For middle grade educators, it is frequently more difficult to diagnose the needs of a 7th grader who speaks no English and cannot read well in his/her native language than it is for their elementary colleagues to diagnose a first grader. There are federal and state statutes that influence some of what must be done. However, given the rich variety of students across many districts, there is no simple or single answer as to the best instructional program. Hence, there is a greater need for data and for thoughtful discussion and reflection before providing specific responses. We suggest that breaking down student profiles by the parents' educational levels, the students' academic preparation in his native country, and assessing skill levels with a standardized norm-referenced achievement test in language arts and math may be a good starting point.

All districts should review the performance of students who have tested out of bilingual or ESL instruction and are now included in the "general" student population. How well they are performing in English reading and writing one, two, and three years later will provide useful information for evaluating the education they received as ELLs.

Almost one in five Abbott students is classified as a student with disabilities

By the middle grades in districts with an effective program of early identification of disabled students and an inclusive pedagogical approach, there should be an increase in the number of students exiting SPED for the general population and an increase in the percentage of the school day that remaining SPED students spend in general classrooms. There are two questions we ask each school with middle grades to answer in its report:

- Are there any students either classified or referred to Child Study Teams ***solely*** because they are not reading on grade level?
- Is there a strong correlation between students who are weak readers and those who are referred for behavioral classifications?

The School Two-year Report on Instructional Priorities

Where the same school serves both middle grades and elementary students, the school should submit a single report in two sections. Since there are no "right answers" to most pedagogical issues, it is most important that the report reflect clearly and accurately the instructional condition of the school or district. This requires that each school establish the relationship of student achievement data with the instructional priorities.

Improving student achievement is the criterion to be used for evaluating and planning the school's work for 2006-07 and 2007-08 and for preparing the school-based budget. The School Two-year Report is due to the district by November 1, 2005; the district's report is due to DOE by November 15, 2005. Obviously, there is not a lot of time and the reports must be done amid the swirl of schools opening. Much of what is required for the reports is based on work that should have already been completed for both Abbott and *NCLB*.

The reports begin with a careful assessment of how students have performed on state, district or national standardized tests over the past three or four years. This review, already completed for the *NCLB* Parallel Application, should be broken out by the *NCLB* subcategories and CES. Again, as with elementary schools, middle grade schools can update last year's reports to include the 2005 State test results.

Standardized test results are important, but not sufficient by themselves, to determine how well students are performing and what's called for to improve that performance. GEPA scores arrive so late in the school year and they do not include item analyses to give precise information on the skills and content areas of greatest weakness. The district's or school's interim assessments will provide a much richer diagnosis of student strengths and weaknesses.

Remember, the most likely explanation for poor student performance is that students are not being taught what is required by the CCCS. Since the core standards dramatically changed academic expectations for middle grade students--particularly in writing, math, and science—the curriculum or its absence is a good starting point. If these standards are not translated into clear and specific classroom practices, then Abbott students will have little chance to close the gap with their affluent peers.

Every teacher should participate in analyzing student achievement and hypothesizing with other teachers about how best to improve performance

Otherwise, we're just producing another paper plan. That is why we ask that every teacher complete a checklist. Because checklists will be completed and discussed early in the school year, first-time or newly transferred teachers may think their early impressions are not valuable. Not so. The checklist is designed to inform, as well as provoke.

These forms are not to be turned in to the central office or DOE. They are intended to encourage discussion among teachers and principals to enrich the assessment and planning process. Once completed, teachers at the same grade level or in the same department should meet and compare their responses. The same is to be done in a faculty meeting of all teachers and the principal. Once these meetings have been held, the principal should share the consolidated results with the SLC to help prepare the report.

The goal of this teacher survey is not to achieve consensus, nor to place blame. Instead, the goal is to stimulate a focused and frank conversation among the educators who are directly responsible for, and knowledgeable about, how well students are working and achieving. Candor and forthrightness are obviously required for this process to work.

Teacher's Review Checklist for Middle Grades

Expectations and school culture	**Yes**	**No**
• Most teachers believe that almost all students can be prepared to handle college prep courses when they get to high school.		
• Our curriculum spells out clearly what I must teach and the student must learn; I consult it frequently in preparing my lesson plans.		
• My students get a syllabus or other instructions that outline what is expected of them for each term, unit, test, or assignment.		
• I know all my students by their work and participation in class and have the time to work with those who are falling behind.		
• I don't think any student "falls through the cracks" or is "just a number" at our school.		
• I would be pleased if my own child attended this school		
Curriculum and instructional materials		
• I know what content must be covered if my students are to be proficient on state assessments of the Core Curriculum Content Standards (CCCS)		
• The district curriculum is specific about what instructional materials are connected to which standards.		
• Less than half my teaching revolves around a textbook; I'm encouraged to use authentic and supplemental materials.		
• The curriculum includes 6- to 10-week units that include assessments or tests to tell me and students whether adequate progress is being made.		
• If I'm not familiar with the <u>content</u> of the curriculum, I know where to turn for help and support.		
Literacy and writing		
• We have a good system for identifying students who are below, at, or above grade level.		
• My students are exposed to a lot of interesting reading beyond anthologies and textbooks that also help them with the content they must master.		
• At least 50 percent of my teaching is done in small-group settings in reading, writing, or my content area.		
• An English/language arts class is at least 80 <u>uninterrupted</u> minutes.		
• Students two or more years below receive an additional 40 minutes of direct instruction in the specific areas in which they are behind		

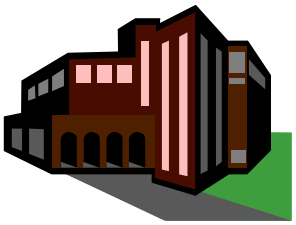
• Students write at least one assignment each week, which is outlined, revised as often as necessary, and displayed or published if of high quality.		
• All students produce short- and long-term projects across the curriculum like short reports, research papers, powerpoint presentations to support speaking assignments, term papers, etc.		
• I find that English language learners who have tested out of bilingual/ESL are able to keep up with their peers.		
• ELLs receive at least 120 minutes of language arts instruction daily.		
• ELLs participate in appropriate language arts literacy programs like native language reading, ESL reading, and /or sheltered English instruction		
Professional respect		
• I'm given time, at least once weekly, to work with my colleagues at grade or department level to share effective practices and discuss individual students.		
• Teachers have a real hand in revising the district curriculum and in selecting supplemental materials.		
• I receive professional development that is based on what I need in my daily teaching.		
• My performance evaluation is based on adequate observation, and is constructive in tone, timely, and fair.		
• I get all the help I need to use computers to improve my teaching.		

Math		
• The school implements a mathematics program that emphasizes the development of mathematical thinking and skills as opposed to memorization and rote exercises.		
• The curriculum includes many assessments and benchmarks to measure progress in each content and process strand. I don't have to wait for an end-of-term/year test to see which students need help.		
• The district assures that mathematics is not taught by going through a textbook alone, but provides supplemental materials, software, and manipulatives, as well.		
• Students are expected to explain their math reasoning both orally and in writing.		
• I use small-group instruction where students can work together to solve problems or pose questions.		
• I find that the software is aligned with the core standards, is user-friendly, and provides students with opportunities for advanced levels of critical thinking, simulation and application of skills.		
• There are opportunities to work mathematics into other classes and projects that involve science, social studies or language arts, even art and music.		

Section

4

High Schools That Prepare Students for College and Beyond



Grumbles, grumbles, and more grumbles. College professors grumble that first-year students can't write the English language or find the cosine of x. Even at four-year universities like Rutgers, over 10 percent of first-year students must take remedial courses in English and over 25 percent of first-year students receive remediation in math*. High school teachers grumble that new ninth graders can't write the English language or multiply fractions. Sixth grade teachers grumble that too many of their students can't write the English language and fourth grade teachers grumble that too many of their students can't read English at grade level.

So it goes and goes and goes. One thing should be clear by now: we're all in this together and if we don't lay out clearly and concretely what is taught and how it's taught for every year from preschool through 12th grade, we'll be listening to these grumbles for years to come.

A second clear point: When New Jersey adopted Core Curriculum Content Standards in 1997 and initiated the high-stakes high school graduation examination, it declared an end to the traditional college prep, general, and vocational education tracks. Beginning in 1998 or so *every student was expected to complete course work that would prepare them to attend a four-year university.*

A final clear point: Particularly with mathematics, a student who has not been taught to the CCCS in the middle grades is not likely to pass the HSPA. "Remedial" courses do not work and most after-school and summer courses cannot close the gap. There is simply too much difficult material to be mastered for drills and "test prep" to give students what they need.

Assessing the Abbott emergency. Most Abbott students do not graduate from high school having mastered the NJ CCCS. In fact, most Abbott students who finish 8th grade in an Abbott school, do not graduate at all. When the Abbott seniors graduating via the Special Review Assessment (SRA) are subtracted from the number of total graduates, we have a clear educational emergency in most Abbott districts.

Excerpt: Rutgers, The State University, Office of Institutional Research and Academic Planning, Characteristics of Undergraduate Students, Section B, p. 7

*All numbers exclude ESL students.

*Remedial numbers are through intermediate algebra.

Data Check

Number of Abbott high schools with a majority of students graduating via the Special Review Assessment (SRA) in 2000: 4
In 2004: 18
Number of Abbott 8th graders taking the GEPA in 2000: 17,698 by district:
Number of Abbott high school seniors graduating in 2004: 12,151
Percent decline 2000—2004: 31.3:
Number of non-Abbott 8th graders taking the GEPA in 2000: 74,351
Number of non-Abbott high school seniors graduating in 2004: 69,941
Percent decline 2000-1004: 5.9 percent

The "Data Check" confirms the extent of the educational emergency. Emergencies require urgency and focus. "Business as usual" just won't do.

A working hypothesis

Having recently held face-to-face conversations about teaching and learning with each district, having completed literacy assessments in 18 of the 31 Abbott districts, and having convened expert panels to dissect the consistently low performance of middle grade students, we have reached a working hypothesis about the biggest explanation for Abbott students under-performing on state assessments. *They are not systematically taught the content set forth in the CCCS.*

"We have not used the fundamental strategies in high schools that have proven successful in elementary and middle schools—a clear, specific, tightly aligned curriculum and the data to see if it has been mastered." From "Taking a Closer Look at High Schools" National Center for Educational Accountability, p. 1

"Alignment, the great equalizer in learning, is further disrupted by spuriously separating the high school curriculum from the K-12 learning experience." Ibid, p.2

Measuring, reflecting on, and adjusting the CCCS for high schools.

"Standards-based instruction," "data-driven instruction," and "alignment" may become the latest examples of buzz words that are frequently exchanged among educators, but they quickly lose their power and meaning. However, these are very concise descriptors of the work that all Abbott districts must do to improve teaching and learning in their high schools. If the work is not done, then most of our comprehensive high schools will remain what they are today - boring centers of remediation that don't work for most students before they drop out, literally or figuratively.

We urge every reader interested in secondary education to read the short, concise, powerful analysis of high school education nationally which can be found as Appendix B. Prepared by the National Center for Educational Accountability, this brief article will confirm that the problems facing New Jersey's large high schools reflect national patterns and that there are habits and practices that will work if tried. www.ecs.org/clearinghouse/63/03/6303.doc

We expect all Abbott districts to revise their curricula this year so that all students in grades five through nine are guaranteed that they will receive instruction on the CCCS that need to be mastered to handle high school work. High schools have become houses of remediation in part because so many 9th graders come so under-prepared for college preparatory work.

We also expect each district to perform analyses during the 2005-06 school year that will help identify the factors contributing to the graduation emergency. Before tackling the job of aligning all high school

courses with the CCCS, we ask that each district take a close look at its June 2005 graduates who graduated via the SRA. In particular, we want to see a report by April 15, 2006 that gives at least the following information:

- The number of SRA graduates who successfully completed all courses required for graduation with their grades;
- The number who completed successfully (grade "C" or better) 75 to 99 percent of required courses;
- The average daily attendance of SRA graduates in grades 9 through 12;
- The average number of days lost to suspension or illness in grades 9 through 12; and
- The scale scores of SRA graduates on each of the GEPA and HSPA subtests.

***Most Abbott students do not graduate** from high school having mastered the NJ core standards.*

The premise of this report is quite simple: a high school's curriculum that is well aligned to the CCCS and to HSPA should result in proficiency shown by students satisfactorily completing required coursework in language arts, mathematics, and science. If students who pass most math, science, and English courses do not pass HSPA, it is possible that the content of those courses are not aligned to the CCCS or that the instruction and assessments in the courses are not faithful to the curriculum or some combination of the two. The survey may assist districts and high schools in identifying the *courses* that must be most closely scrutinized in the revision to the district's secondary curriculum.

Connecting with every student—personalization and smaller learning communities.

High schools are a hot national topic. Many foundations and the federal government are devoting substantial resources to restructuring large, comprehensive schools to create more personalized and manageable learning communities.

Last year, DOE introduced the "Secondary Education Initiative" that laid out three closely related objectives: increased academic rigor to reflect the CCCS; a more personalized system so that every student knows there is at least one professional staff member who is responsible for his/her well-being; and, the creation of smaller academies or learning communities in very large middle and high schools.

By this time in the school year, each Abbott district should have designated a team of teachers, supervisors, principals, parents, board members, and central office staff to begin planning how the latter two objectives should be approached. Since we know that both ideas will engender substantial changes in scheduling, courses, faculty and student relations and choices, the division has selected four districts—Bridgeton, Elizabeth, Jersey City, and Orange—to work with us and national consultants to apply the standards that were proposed last year. In the process, we expect to learn a great deal that can be shared with other Abbott districts as they undertake their own planning. By next year we expect to have standards and practices in place that have been tested and modified as informed by this four-district pilot for application by all districts.

Teacher's Review of Instruction and Learning

Checklist for High Schools

Expectations	Yes	No
• Most students are scheduled for courses in the "general" track, with a minority in "college prep" or the "vocational" tracks.		
• We expect all students to pass Algebra I by the end of 9th grade; those that do not are given extra help (after school, summer) until they do pass.		
• I make frequent use of the district curriculum in preparing my lesson plans;		
• Students receive a syllabus for every course that spells out what is expected, in what form, by what date and what material must be read to be prepared for interim and end-of-course tests or papers.		
• Student attendance is carefully reported and students who are late or absent are quickly contacted by the school		
• Our school gives careful and continuous attention to ensuring that all students take and pass the courses required for graduation.		
• Teachers lay out clearly what students must do to earn an A or B in every course.		
Curriculum and instructional materials		
• Our curriculum sorts the CCCS to emphasize those that are most important and most likely to be tested on HSPA.		
• The curriculum includes specific benchmarks in 6- to 8 week units with interim assessments to identify lagging students.		
• Most classes rely on textbooks to guide classroom instruction, homework, and chapter tests to gauge interim progress.		
• All courses include end-of-course assessments that are reviewed by the school and district.		
• Students who pass their courses, almost always pass HSPA.		

Professional respect		
• My principal meets with me to review student work**.**		
• Last week I spent the equivalent of at least one class period meeting with teacher colleagues to go over content, teaching strategies, or individual student problems.		
• I know, or can find out easily, which teachers represented my subject area in reviewing and revising the district curriculum.		

• Most of the professional development I receive is general and not tied directly to my subject area or grade level.		
• The teacher's performance evaluation is based on adequate observation, is constructive in tone, timely, and fair.		
• Teachers in each subject area are capable of teaching Advanced Placement courses in their subject.		
Literacy and writing		
• Teachers have a wide, interesting and diverse range of reading materials to assign.		
• Students write about what they read and critique what they and others write, and students write frequently in courses other than English/language arts.		
• Student writing samples that cover a wide range of assignments are planned, revised and published when the specific purpose of the assignment/writing is achieved (process writing).		
• Students write for a variety of purposes, including, but not limited to, response to literature, exposition, narrative, research, poetry, persuasive/argumentative, etc.		
• Students are expected to read at least four books a semester and to write about what they read.		

Math		
• The school implements a mathematics program that emphasizes the development of mathematical thinking as opposed to memorization and rote exercises alone.		
• All students are given the opportunity to complete Algebra I by the end of ninth grade or by the second year of an integrated high school math course.		
• Students are required to communicate about mathematics, both orally and in writing, to explain their reasoning and to make connections among mathematical strands and the real world.		
• The curriculum includes multiple assessment strategies and benchmarks for measuring progress for each content and process strand.		
• Students are given regular opportunities to manipulate objects and models to represent mathematical concepts.		
• The school uses software that is aligned with CCCS, is effective in improving student performance and provides students with opportunities for advanced levels of critical thinking, simulation and application of skills.		
• The curriculum applies mathematics across the disciplines of language arts, science, social studies, technology, art and music.		
School culture		
• Most students appear to be bored most of the time in most of their courses.		
• I am available by e-mail to my students or their parents.		
• In addition to talking with my colleague teachers about content and teaching strategies, we talk about how to make instruction more engaging and interesting for students and ourselves.		
• Students, parents, and visitors are greeted with respect in a safe, clean, and hospitable environment		

DATA APPENDIX

In addition to the *NCLB* subgroups, DOE requires that schools and districts report on those students who have been continuously enrolled for at least three years (called "continuously enrolled students" or "CES"). CES takes away the unfairness of reporting results for students who only recently enrolled in a school or district. Schools will report students in three CES classifications:

- Out-of-district transfers, called "non-CES" (i.e. less than three years in both the district and school);
- Within-district transfers, called "CES-District" (i.e. more than three years in the district but less than three years at the school); and,
- Non-transfer, called "CES-School" (i.e. more than three years in both the district and school).

The DOE has included an Excel program that can be used to prepare and present the CES data and the *NCLB* subgroups (districts can also create a report using Access or another database, or develop its own form). Here is the information each elementary school must report:

- Enrollments from the Application for State School Aid (ASSA) for each year 1999 through 2004 by grade;
- The count of students who took the Elementary School Proficiency Assessment (ESPA) or New Jersey Assessment of Skills and Knowledge, Fourth Grade (NJASK4) in each year 1999 through 2004 by all (i.e. Total) students, as well as the following four subgroup groupings:
  - *Regular/Special Needs* (three levels)—General Education (GE), English Language Learners (ELL, a.k.a. LEP), and Special Education (SPED);
  - *Racial/Ethnic* (six levels)—White, Asian/Pacific Islander, African-American, Hispanic, Native American, and Other Ethnicity;
  - *Economically Disadvantaged* (two levels)—Free or Reduced Price Lunch eligible and non-eligible; and,
  - *Continuously Enrolled* (three levels)—Out-of-district transfers within past three years, within-district transfers within past three years (i.e. CES-District), and non-transfers past three years (i.e. CES-School);
- Results for each year by all students and subgroups by mean scaled score, and the percentages by performance level (proficient, advanced proficient and partially proficient) for each; and
- The results reported in the same way for any standardized norm-referenced tests used for the K-3 and fifth grades by year and by student category. Please indicate the test version being reported (e.g., TerraNova Custom). This is particularly important since the NJASK4 results are received too late and without item analyses to be particularly helpful in adjusting instruction.

- Kindergarten:
  - How many of your kindergarten students attended Abbott preschool programs, non-Abbott programs, or no program?
  - Are there any measurable differences in how well-prepared students from the various programs are for kindergarten?
- English Language Learners:
  - How well do students who have exited the ELL program perform on state and other assessments?
  - Is there any difference among students who were in dual language programs or transitional bilingual programs versus those in ESL-only or English-only programs?
- Students with Disabilities:
  - How well have students with disabilities performed on NJASK4 when viewed by disability?
    - How have the sub-classifications most likely to be mainstreamed (i.e. speech-only and learning disabled) fared compared with general education?
    - Are there sub-classifications that significantly lag other SPED categories within the school? How does this "gap" compare with that of the district as a whole?
  - What percentage exceeded the average statewide cluster scores?
  - Are there differences in performance among students who are in self-contained classrooms as compared with those receiving in-class support or those in resource rooms?